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Residents make their case for saving trees and pipeline safety at special meeting

By Pippa Fisher



Photo Pippa Fisher

Pipeline Safety Initiative, residents' concerns grew to address the lack of automatic shut-off valves, exposed pipeline, lack of testing and aging infrastructure. Residents formed the group Save Lafayette Trees, which brought a lawsuit against PG&E and the city.

In a packed room following a lengthy presentation from PG&E during which time Council Member Mike Anderson intervened to keep the meeting on track to save enough time for all residents to speak, close to 30 of those residents argued their points articulately and wanted their voices heard.

Speakers included high school students, engineers, biologists and first responders who took issue with many of PG&E's claims that tree roots potentially damage pipeline and that trees should be removed to allow emergency response access. Several speakers demanded the \$500,000 paid to the city by the utility as part of the agreement should be returned and put toward making Lafayette's pipelines safer.

SLT co-founder Michael Dawson accused PG&E of scare tactics and said that residents have lost trust in the utility. "This half-billion dollar Community Pipeline Safety Initiative is an unregulated and unnecessary program, not required by law. Six years after its rollout, PG&E has not improved their pipeline safety record," he said.

Michael Dawson and many of the speakers asked for PG&E to release the city from the 2017 agreement and for the formation of a citizens advisory committee to work with the city and the utility.

Having heard public comments Anderson suggested the first step would be for PG&E to release the city from any deadline. He said he was happy for the city to return the money and wanted the issue placed on a future agenda. Since Mayor Don Tatzin and Council Member Ivor Samson both recuse themselves from meetings with PG&E, such a future meeting will have to be when all three remaining members of council can attend.

It did seem that PG&E was listening and is open to continued dialogue.

PG&E Marketing and Communications Manager Jeff Smith commented after the meeting that they would be open to continuing a dialogue with those parties provided it includes the city and the CPUC. "We are in the process of deciding on next steps," he said.

Smith said that PG&E appreciated the city's interest in looking to facilitate a path forward to address this important public safety issue and pointed to the utility's previous participation in "multiple good-faith discussions with well-intentioned members of the community looking for more information on how to make their city as safe as possible."

SLT co-founder Gina Dawson was a little more positive after the meeting. "It was awe-inspiring to me. From the Campolindo Environmental Club students to the octogenarian, what a range of people passionately united on a community-wide issue," she said.

Gina Dawson credits Burks for getting PG&E and CPUC in the same room. "Kudos to Mark Mitchell and Mike Anderson for ensuring residents adequate time to comment. Hearing everyone's voices was critical. Mike's offer of return of CPSI money and question of tree cutting deadline was incredible and certainly the right

thing to do, in my opinion. The public witnessed a genuine, unfettered response to their concerns," she said.

Burks too was optimistic. "It was a very constructive meeting. My hope is that PG&E and Save Lafayette Trees will keep the dialogue going and will bring back to the council a solution - one that balances both safety and citizens' concerns - so that the council can act in the best interests of all Lafayette residents."

Gina Dawson acknowledges there's still a lot of work to be done, but says "I think the city and PG&E have clarity on what the community thinks necessary to restore credibility."

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